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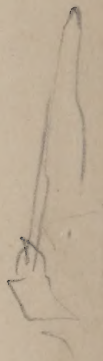

The Prospects and Claims of Pure Christianity;

A

SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

DEDICATION

OF THE

7546.125

TWELFTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

IN BOSTON,

OCTOBER 13, 1824.

BY JOHN G. PALFREY, A. M.
Pastor of the Church in Brattle Square.

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SERMON.

MATTHEW XVI. 3.

CAN YE NOT DISCERN THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES?

We are assembled to dedicate a new house of Christian worship to the service of Almighty God. Such a structure was observed to be required by the rapid growth of this flourishing part of our city, and measures were accordingly taken for its erection, by disinterested individuals, under a genuine impulse, as we trust, of zeal for the divine glory, and the good of men. Nor has this motive been alloyed by any spirit of schism. On the contrary, the original projectors of the enterprise, as well as a large proportion of those who have since embarked in it, remain attached to the same religious institutions as before. So far from interrupting, they design to extend our Christian union. They hope that they are introducing another member into our harmonious fraternity. Attached themselves to that system of scriptural belief which prevails in the old Congregational Churches of this place,—the system whose prominent features are well known to be the *personal unity and parental character of God*, and the *intelligible import and moral design of Christianity*,—they hope that they

are providing for it here another sanctuary. They hope that, as long as these walls shall stand, more and more of its truth and beauty may be here made manifest; and that the happy experience of many may evince it, what in their consciences and before the searcher of hearts they believe it to be,—*the power of God unto salvation.*

Sympathizing in their views of the nature and their hopes of the dissemination of Christian truth, I should seem to be insensible to the special interest of this occasion, if, standing here to assist the reflections suggested by it, I should wander from that natural train of thought, which is leading my hearers to a consideration of the prospects of what we account uncorrupt Christianity.—I am to ask your attention to some particulars, in which we conceive that encouraging anticipations concerning it are authorized by the *signs of the times.*

I. We perceive favourable indications in the CIRCUMSTANCES OF OUR SOCIAL CONDITION. When the inquiry is presented to us, why just views of our religion have as yet made such partial progress, we find ourselves compelled to answer, that it has been in no small part owing to the *legal persecutions* against which they have had to struggle. In that long disastrous period which preceded the great religious revolution in the sixteenth century, it is well known how dissent in the most minute particulars was punished. In the very dawn of the reformation, views of our religion to a greater extent just, than one would suppose could possibly have been reached so soon and under circumstances so unpropitious, revealed themselves in various and disconnected quarters. But it was before long ascertained, by bitter experience, that the right of private judgment, in the proper extent of that principle, was by no means established, when the rulers of Protestant communities had vindicated it in arms for themselves. *Toleration*, or indulgence, appeared to be the most that the age was ripe for allowing to hereticks,—that is, to the weaker party in a state; and even the limits of its toleration were extremely narrow. At the

height of the contest which Calvin was professedly carrying on for liberty of conscience, a brother reformer, for exercising his own, suffered martyrdom at his instance, under the most melancholy aggravations. When, warned by this event and others of a like character, the more consistent Protestants from the various states of Europe had fled to Poland,—then the freest country of that continent,—the flourishing community, which they established there, was assailed and at length subverted by a series of the most cruel oppressions. In Holland, severities of a similar kind arrested the reformation at its incipient stage. In our own parent country, within fifteen years after the first translation of the Bible, an ecclesiastick records, that 'Arianism now shewed itself so openly, and was in such danger of spreading further, that it was thought necessary to suppress it by more rugged methods than seemed agreeable to the merciful principles of the Gospel.'* From that period to the period of the revolution, capital executions for this offence were not few; and, when it ceased to be a felony in that kingdom, it was made punishable with incapacities amounting to outlawry, by a statute which was only repealed within the last twelve years. No one, I trust, will suppose that these statements are made on account of the sentiment of strong disapprobation which they excite; but, with the fact before us, that views of Christianity, like those which we maintain, have shown a strong tendency to reveal and diffuse themselves, and that the opposition which has arrested their progress has been not that of argument but of violence, we cannot but hope for them a better fate in an age of greatly improved legislation, and especially in a country, whose free institutions place them, as far as institutions of government can do it, on the ground of an equal competition.

But penal laws are by no means the only political provisions for dooming religious knowledge to a perpetual infancy. No contemptible influence is exerted by a *religious*

* *Strype, in his Life of Archbishop Cranmer.*

establishment, with its civil prerogatives, its magnificent endowments, and ample patronage. Nor may it be said that these can only operate on vain and mercenary minds. It is hard to determine how effectual may be a bias, which imperceptibly inclines an honest mind to prefer the worse to the better reason. An establishment invests itself with associations of permanence, respectability, and national honour, which have a peculiar attraction for men of character. Nay, a religious faith which has been long professed, even without any secular advantages, must needs be tainted with some extreme infirmity, if it have not wrought itself deep into the texture of society, and the retirements of just and generous feeling. Literature and manners must unavoidably have taken a tone from it. Opinions of every sort have become formed to it, so as to make it appear that a degree of incongruity would be produced by its abandonment. All the kindling associations of antiquity, which thoughtful men cherish, range themselves by its side to forbid a rude inquisition into its character. By it their fathers lived and died. The institutions under which they have prospered remind them that it was in the stimulus furnished by it that they were established and have been maintained ; and every monument of ancient worth, every scene of former heroick action or endurance, pleads for it with no feeble urgency. It is not to be doubted that minds, independent and inquisitive on other subjects, have been betrayed into acquiescence and inactivity concerning this by influences of the kind of which we speak ; and therefore we conceive our social institutions to be propitious to the cause of impartial inquiry and Christian truth, not only in their free character, but in their recent date. With us, every thing is too new for errour to have had time thus to intrench itself ; besides that the sentiment which we associate the most strongly with all that we can call antiquity among us, is an independence and dread of human assumptions over the conscience.

II. We place no small reliance on the improved HABITS

OF THINKING which prevail. We observe that opinions which we reject have been recommended by a weight of authority, which has heretofore been able to afford them very efficient support. A subjection of its judgments to authority indicates a sensitive debility of the mind; a condition of it, in which it has been either enervated and deprived of self reliance by fear, or has surrendered itself to the power of imagination and sentiment. The natural consummation of implicit self surrender to a traditional belief is witnessed in the mental dwarfishness of those Eastern nations, whose intellect has been cramped by it for ages. Under a similar tyranny the scarcely more improved portion of mankind, called civilized, long languished in a truly wretched condition of abjectness and impotence; and crude and hasty opinions, started in a dark period of Christian history, were meanwhile maintained and transmitted in the character of venerable truths. But the influence of authority has sensibly declined. It has come to be understood, that, for the world to refuse to reform its opinions, as it grows older and more discerning, is no more to be justified, than for an individual to reject the judgments of his maturer years because they contradict his childish conceptions. We now take very little upon trust. It is the growing habit of the times for every man to have his own opinions; and it is almost indispensable to our self respect and our claim of respect from others, that we should be able to maintain them by reasons of our own. Thus a main support of erroneous theories has been withdrawn; and an upright unbiassed investigation of Christian truth is no longer so severe an effort for the mind.

Compared with others, this is not only an age of *independent judgment* but of energetick and excursive *inquiry*. It not only refuses to have errour imposed upon it, but it goes out adventurously in pursuit of truth. The reverence which had been felt for forms of human device has not long and generally enough been transferred to the scriptures, the true source of knowledge and umpire in controversy, to bear freely, as yet, its proper fruits; and there

are moral causes which have hitherto prevented the same general interest from being felt in religion as in other practical sciences. But we look forward with happy anticipations to a time, approaching in the probable course of events, when the intrepidity and earnestness which have characterized researches into other departments of knowledge, will be carried more extensively than now into the investigations of the sublimest of them all ;—when a due portion of the awakened intellect of men will be given to a curious inquisition into the sense of the *lively oracles*, a keen attention to learn that *mind of the Lord* which they disclose.

The present may perhaps be safely described as comparatively an age of *exact* thinking. A severer, if a less pretending logick has taken the place of that magnificent apparatus of self deception, which disputants of other times were used to wield. Men are not so apt as they have been to misapprehend the bearing of a known truth on a truth under discussion, or to permit the strength of their confidence to be widely out of proportion to the strength of their reasons. At any rate, whatever they may think of this, all will agree, that the age is of such a practical character as to be comparatively little prone to deviate from exactness on the side of mysticism ; and herein we discern an omen of no small encouragement. There has been no enemy to the power of Christianity greater than the imputation, under which it has laboured, of being a faith of mysteries. Nothing could more completely confuse, nothing could more effectually discourage the study of it, than to represent it as to such a degree intricate, and so essentially different from other subjects of human knowledge, as to unsettle by its adoption the radical principles of belief. Nothing could be more sure to prejudice thinking men against it, than the idea of its attempting a violent divorce of that eternal union which God has instituted between the understanding and truth. Nothing could more directly tend to deaden that interest of the mind in it, without which the interest of the heart has only a most feeble

and precarious life. No other source of errour could be so endlessly prolifick. If we can assent to one proposition that seems self contradictory, we may assent on the same terms to another; and there is nothing to prevent us from believing, against all evidence, that Christianity is a fable, and the being of God a dream. In this age of wary thought the truth is less obscured than it has been, that the doctrines of revealed religion differ from other parts of our knowledge in the method of their communication and the importance of their uses, and not in the strange peculiarity of bearing a strong likeness to falsehood in its most distinguishing feature. In truths relating to religion, as well as others, we have begun to look for the appropriate signatures of truth. And there has appeared such a settled and growing dissatisfaction with arguments which assume that religion is a peculiarly unintelligible subject, that a corresponding change may already be observed in the conduct of controversies. We much less commonly than heretofore find doctrines, charged with involving contradiction, sheltered under the name of mysteries. They are now more frequently defended by attempts to show, that the alleged repugnancy to reason does not exist.

Besides these general principles of a reformation of religious opinion, there are particulars, in which a fatal inconsistency might be pointed out between single errours that have prevailed, and the habits of thinking that are gaining ground, such as in their natural tendency must needs operate to the subversion of the former. But it would lead us too far to attempt thus to particularize. If the almost obsolete doctrine of the saving power of ordinances is not the only popular tenet marked with the impress of an age that believed in charms and magick, rather than of an age accustomed to attend to a connexion between causes and effects, we may be sure that it is not to go alone into the tomb of once powerful delusions. If our belief is just, that the system improperly called orthodox has throughout a close congeniality with the infancy of the mind,—the immature,

unformed, dependent stage of its progress,—our inference is safe that, as the latter is left behind, the former too will disappear. False doctrines in religion were scarcely more securely established, three centuries ago, than false doctrines in politicks. If they rested equally on that basis of implicit, incurious, bewildered faith, which has since been effectually shaken, it was to be expected that the religious errours would be the last to be thoroughly exposed, because, among other reasons, the investigation of these is approached with a greater awe. The best among the triumphs of the reanimated mind of man has been achieved among ourselves. May we not hope that a far better still awaits it here? Our native country has led the way in the rejection of political errours. Is it forbidden by the *signs of the times* to hope, that it is to be also the pioneer of a wide religious reformation? The oversight of such solemn interests as the interests of this people, at stake upon their own exercise of independent and cautious thought, may safely be assumed to be so far a salutary discipline of the mind to prepare it for all grave investigations; and in the next generation will be comprehended many, who, in receiving the truths of uncorrupt Christianity, will not have those prejudices of education to correct, which have been obstacles, hard and grievous to surmount, in the way of most of their predecessors of this age.

III. We draw a favourable augury from the improved and improving STATE OF INFORMATION. The system of orthodoxy had its birth in a very ignorant period of the world. Such a period is its proper element; and, tenacious as it is of life, it does not seem to be properly constituted to thrive in any other. The doctrine of the Trinity, in the complete form in which it has been transmitted to us, dates from the latter part of the fourth century. It is traced to that system of philosophy,—unjustly called the Platonick, for few of its vagaries are chargeable on the philosopher from whom it borrowed its name—which, in that age of visionary speculation, abused the minds of studious men. The introduc-

tion into the church of total depravity and predestination, with their kindred errours, is referred to a period somewhat later; but these doctrines never obtained a paramount authority in the church of Rome, nor appeared, till the era of the reformation, in the prominence into which they have since been forced. Of that period in the history of the religious world, to which the name *reformation* is commonly limited, no more can be justly said, than that an almost total eclipse began then to pass away from the mind. It was by no means to be expected, that a complete revision and expurgation of religious doctrine should be made in the course of a few years; in the hurry and tumult of civil wars; while so many practical abuses were first to be redressed; while ancient prejudices were as yet only unsettled; while not only the opposition of the bigotted was to be encountered, but also the scruples of the timid; and while the art of thinking was yet to be learned. But what I am here particularly concerned to notice is, that the *learning* requisite for a successful criticism of the scriptures was very partially possessed by the leading reformers. They were but moderately acquainted with the original languages, and very imperfectly with those kindred dialects which have since thrown so much light upon scriptural phraseology.—Their investigations into the composition and history of the Bible had not been sufficiently extensive to correct essentially those false rules of interpretation which had prevailed; and their comparisons of *spiritual things with spiritual* had been greatly incomplete. And let it be always remembered, that there was then no genuine good sense, as now, of a well informed common people, to correct the extravagancies of reasoning pride; but men, whose minds were prepossessed with idle systems,—scholars, such as they were in those days, studying and reasoning in the trammels of a vitious scholarship,—were the instructors of Christians in Christian doctrine. It was not till a later period that the scriptures,—to say nothing of adequate means of understanding them,—could be said to be in the possession of the people

at large. Translations, it is true, were soon made; but, in the existing state of unacquaintance with the elements of knowledge, their circulation was of course extremely confined, and the perception of their meaning still more so; and the few, who could read and gather any opinions from them, were no match for the already organized ascendency of those, who were theorists by profession, and, as such, incompetent interpreters, as theories then were, of a book like the Bible. I repeat it, the Bible cannot be said to have been to any considerable extent subjected to the investigation of unprejudiced men till within a recent period; and I would particularly ask attention to this fact from those, who are fond of founding an argument on the opinions of the first settlers of this part of our country;—men, worthy of all reverence for their virtues, but whose judgments on a question of scriptural research we can by no means prefer to our own. King James' version,—the first which came into very extensive use,—had scarcely been published when they landed in this country. How many copies is it probable they brought with them? Of those whose opinions are now quoted as authority to us, how many is it reasonable to assume that there were, who had read the Bible with a patient scrutiny? How many may be supposed to have had any definite information concerning its sense, distinct from what they had gathered from the expositions of systematick theologians? Even the more judicious and learned Christian expositors, of that time and long afterwards, laboured under an inconvenience arising from their being but partially possessed of the requisite learning. I suppose no one can consult the early Arminian writers without being struck by the fact, that, while their good sense and comprehensive views of the Christian system, as a whole, often guided them with remarkable precision to the sense of particular passages in scripture, they were not seldom embarrassed, in maintaining their interpretation, by arguments which a more intimate acquaintance with its phraseology would have enabled them readily to repel. This is a deficien-

cy, which has long been in a course of adequate supply. If the doctrines of the Bible have not yet been extensively enough investigated with the lively interest which they deserve, few branches of knowledge, since the reformation, have received equally laborious attention from able men with those which elucidate its meaning. A pure text has been obtained by the collection of numerous authorities ; the original languages of scripture, and others which explain their words and forms of speech, have come to be vastly better understood than they were at the time when Protestant creeds were framed; the opinions, the manners, and events of the period to which the books of the New Testament refer,—all subsidiary branches of knowledge, in short,—have been curiously investigated ; and that argument on such questions is not doomed to be wholly unavailing, a satisfactory practical proof has been given in the almost unanimous dismission from the controversy, by learned Christians of all opinions, of three texts,* always reckoned among the most plausible in defence of the triple distinction in the Godhead. Scriptural knowledge has not only become far more comprehensive, profound and exact, but it has begun to assume a popular form, and has been brought sufficiently within the reach of common readers to give them some preparation for estimating the weight of statements and arguments proposed in expositions and controversy. It is as true as it is melancholy, that attempts to put the publick at large in possession of the needful information for a better understanding of the word of life, still meet with strong opposition. But that knowledge has been acquired ; it is secure ; and it will diffuse itself. Thanks to the kind providence which preceded the reformation of the Christian faith by an art for communicating and perpetuating truth, there is no suppressing it. It is the permanent, inalienable property of man. It will be time to fear that it will be lost, when we see the intellectual world stop short in its swift progress, and roll back towards the thick darkness from which the fifteenth

* *Acts, XX.* 28. 1. *Tim. III.* 16. 1. *John, V.* 7.

century delivered it. It is a steadily, though it be a silently operating agent of reform, destined to work more and more mightily for the overthrow of the strong holds of errour.

It would be here the place to speak of another influence of the existing and improving state of information, in favouring the progress of religious truth ; but I have only time for a passing allusion to it. There is a principle of consistency in the human mind, which requires a correspondence between the different subjects of its belief; and whatever opinion is distinctly seen to be adverse to or incongruous with the rest, must, if they are retained, be itself discarded. In this way we conceive that the progress of information of every sort is weeding out false opinions in religion. They are at war with all the rest of our knowledge ; and, the more our knowledge on other subjects is enlarged, the more distinctly will their discrepancy with it appear. Every new truth we discover, of any sort, is a new foe to them, and, as fast as its relations and consequences are observed, exerts an augmented power to expose and dispossess them. The stronger lights which will thus be thrown upon them will help to remove that indefiniteness to which they have so long resorted for shelter, and their real repulsive shape will be more and more palpably revealed.

IV. We discern an encouraging *sign of the times* in the STATE OF FEELING which exists, and is gaining ground.— Rational views of Christianity have been always pleading for a candid examination. They have been always urging, that they were ready to abide by the result of the most severe impartial scrutiny. But this privilege has been denied them. They have been regarded with jealous and stubborn prejudice; and whatever converts they have made they have violently drawn to themselves by force of the strong reasons they were able to produce. It would be disingenuous to say, that this state of things has entirely ceased ; but we feel authorized to represent the temper of the times as comparatively a spirit of *candour*. The habit of liberal enquiry on all subjects favours such a spirit ; the

universal discipline of the mind, at the present day, is in no small degree congenial with its enlargement and elevation; the eminent virtues of many persons, professing rational views of our religion, have done not a little to lighten the odium, under which they have laboured; the weighty obligations, under which the world has come to distinguished individuals among them, has not been wholly without effect to conciliate it; and the controversies, in which they have taken part, have caused their opinions and characters to be more justly estimated. Controversy, with all its temptations, is by no means to be indiscriminately charged with cherishing an unkind spirit. Nothing softens men so much as to see reasons for entertaining a mutual respect; to be shewn that they, who differ from them, differ deliberately and conscientiously; and never, at any period in Christendom of the most profound religious ignorance and apathy, were there so many, who could bear a contradiction, and consider an adverse argument with good temper, as at this busy period of religious discussion.

Again; there are indications which seem to justify the remark, that the state of feeling, in respect to religion, is characterized by *engagedness*. There was perhaps never a time, when its doctrines were discussed in the Protestant world with more appearance of genuine interest; when it made a more frequent subject of conversation; when it could more readily command exertions and sacrifices; or when its appropriate spirit had a greater control over the motions of society. Now in proportion as religion is felt to be a momentous reality, it is reasonable to expect that religious inquiries will be pursued with an intense desire to know the truth. That state of feeling, which has hitherto exposed the exercise of candour to the reproach of indifference, will disappear. That argument, which men never use with respect to trade, or politicks, or any thing else in which their minds are really engaged,—that it is of little consequence what a man believes—will no longer be used in respect to religion. It will be perceived that, of all kinds of truth,

that is infinitely the most valuable, which relates to men's infinitely most important interests; and the energies of the mind will be bent to its acquisition in some better proportion to its worth.

Nor are those, who have habitually avoided the discussion of religious doctrines, the only persons, whose religious knowledge must needs be increased by a deeper conviction of its value. It is perfectly obvious, that many persons are animated by far more zeal in defending their opinions, than in ascertaining them. They are in earnest in *holding fast*, but not in *proving all things*, to see that what they hold fast *is good*;—which would not be, if they had a deep practical interest in the subject. Indeed, so great have become the advantages for investigating Christian truth, that I am impressed with the belief, that nothing is so much wanting henceforward as *simplicity and godly sincerity* in the use of them. The thing mainly needful is to begin and conduct our researches under a strong impression of the importance of arriving at the truth, such as shall raise us above every meaner motive; such as shall make us deaf to the solicitations of partiality and prejudice, inflexible by the favour or the fear of man. Men reason very carelessly on the subject of Christianity. They seem to think that they can be justified in starting with some general prepossession concerning it which has a plausible appearance, and interpreting the whole system by that key. Thus one takes for the basis of his reasoning some loose view of the divine sovereignty, and another arrives at opposite conclusions from views equally loose of the divine mercy. One, acknowledging the worth of an humble spirit, seeks to debase man from his station of a responsible agent, because he conceives that this would favour humility; while another perceives that Christianity must be a serious or a fervent religion, and accordingly, whatever doctrine his judgment or his imagination connects with seriousness and fervour he hastily embraces without the due attention to its evidence. Men's

consciences are hard upon this point, or they would not do an injustice to religion, which they do to no other important subject, by theorizing so confidently upon it. They need a keener sensibility to the worth of truth, to lead them to search for it with a proper singleness of mind. Observe the success of their investigations in another science of great extent and subtilty. Questions of *law* respect the various rights and duties of the social state. New questions are continually arising, and are forthwith solved; and the solution is rested upon grounds so satisfactory, that the cases are extremely rare, in which it is afterwards brought into dispute. Why then these endless debates in theology? Is it because the science is more intricate? No one will maintain it, who believes that God is good; for it is but a few men in a nation who need to be versed in the obscure doctrines of social justice, but it deeply concerns every man to know the way of everlasting life. Is it because we have greater helps in the former department of knowledge, than in the latter? On the contrary, the science of law is in great part the fabrick of unassisted human genius; while, in studying the will of God, we have his word for *a light to our steps*. The difference is no other than this,—that we perceive and feel the practical importance of the investigations of the former science. We realize that any errour would be attended with very serious evil consequences. We are therefore strictly on our guard against errour. We watch against all the sources of deception. We suffer no intrusion of prejudice or interest. Our feelings and our fancies are sternly dismissed from the investigation. The truth and nothing but the truth is the object of our search, and therefore the truth reveals itself. When a scrutiny like this shall have been generally bestowed on the sacred records,—when the laws of evidence shall have been as honestly applied to them, and their decisions been sought out with an equal acuteness and vigour,—I see no cause to doubt that the genuine doctrines of religion will be as unanimously acknowledged as the doctrines of law; and for such a consumma-

tion we are encouraged to hope by every appearance of increasing interest in religion.

One more remark respecting the habits of feeling which prevail. The *moral sentiment* of the times is in advance of that of earlier periods, and is still in a progress of elevation and refinement. The value of moral excellence is more acknowledged. Religion and goodness are not set in opposition, as in other times they have been. The treacherous and sanguinary men whom the gross devotion of other times has canonized, would attract no reverence in this period of the world; and, tenaciously as the argument is still maintained, that moral worth,—the true perfection of man,—is of no account in the sight of God, there is still no theory which does not provide some method, however circuitous, to enforce its obligation. The omen is a good one. In proportion as the worth of moral excellence is perceived, the nature of Christianity, as an instrument for forming that excellence, will reveal itself also; and there is no principle, more essential than this of its practical character,—its moral design,—to a consistent and comprehensive view of its truths.

There is another way in which an improved moral sentiment favours a right understanding of our religion. It tends to correct very erroneous conceptions of the divine character, which, taking their rise from a rude state of moral feeling, have done in past times deep discredit to our holy faith. It is within a recent period, that the doctrine of the damnation of infants was commonly maintained. The better moral sentiment of these times so revolts from it, that it is now very rarely, at least, avowed.—There is reason to hope, that a still greater sensibility to reproaches on the character of God, will before long silence that heart-withering charge against it, which is conveyed in the doctrine of election and reprobation. Already it is perceived to be critical ground, and that doctrine is set forth, not in its horrible nakedness, but in phraseology, which, by perplexing the subject, evades or qualifies the

strong disgust, with which it would otherwise be generally met. This alone is a great gain. The publick mind, no longer plied with arguments for believing things of God, which it would abhor in man, has not, to the same extent as formerly, its moral judgments confounded, and its devout affections repelled; and, restored to its healthy tone, will soon be incapable of looking on such errours except with shuddering and loathing.

V. We form encouraging anticipations concerning the future, from the EXPERIENCE OF THE PAST, limited though it be. The principles of improved religious knowledge, to which we have referred, though as yet only tending towards their mature strength, have already borne excellent fruit; and it is to be observed, that the parts of Christendom in which rational views of religion have made the greatest progress, have been those, in which the scriptures have been studied with the liveliest interest, and under the best advantages. In Geneva, the spontaneous soil, the central point and strong hold of orthodoxy, where, from the first establishment of Protestantism, religious studies have been industriously pursued by a select, accomplished, and, for a long time, bigotted clergy, they have already triumphed over the creeds of Calvin, and superseded his doctrine in the churches. In England, the secure establishment of the national church against the attempts of Popery on the one hand, and nonconformity on the other, had afforded no long time for calm investigation, before we find a large and most respectable portion of its clergy petitioning for relief from the obligation of subscription to articles, which they perceived to contain essential errours. In Holland, though it is but lately that a rigid censorship over the press has ceased, rational opinions in religion are understood already to prevail to no inconsiderable extent; and in America they have diffused and are diffusing themselves with a rapidity, which has surprized even their advocates. Nor are we to estimate their progress merely by the numbers of those, who have adopted them.— They are justly considered to have gained ground in pro-

portion as the tone of the opposite errours is lowered; and the controversies, by which they have been maintained, have undeniably had the effect, not only of making converts to them, but of bringing the views of their opponents much nearer to scripture and reason than they had been. With the same causes in continually stronger operation, which have actually reformed the views of so many of this generation, may not a great progress of religious opinion be reasonably looked for in the next?

Such are some of the *signs of the times*, which we interpret to mean that a better day for Christianity is approaching. Can any prospect be more delightful to the eye of philanthropy or devotion? Our religion was revealed to train men for all the various and excellent happiness, which their constitution makes them capable of enjoying. But it was revealed to an ignorant and wicked world, and it suffered cruel injury from the errours and vices which it came to correct. Philosophy first, in its vain pride, and then worldliness, in its base policy, took it into their charge; and through many a gloomy century it was made to hold the mind in bondage, and the heart in barrenness. At length the great work of reformation was entrusted to men gifted for that office with the *spirit of knowledge and might, of understanding and of the fear of the Lord.* They addressed themselves to the task with an energy proportioned to its vastness, and the monstrous edifice of false religion shook to its base before their vigorous onset. But their undertaking was by no means of a magnitude to be summarily accomplished. The abuses which had prevailed had not been inattentive to their own preservation. They had used well the long period of their sway in disguising and fortifying themselves; so that the reformers entered upon their work with very inadequate conceptions of its extent; they prosecuted it, under such a disadvantage, against an almost

overpowering opposition ; and it is no wonder that they died and left it greatly incomplete. Meanwhile, the errours, which had escaped their animadversion or won their favour, had become in their turn established errours, and governments were pledged and prejudices enlisted in their behalf. There was no short period in Protestant history when the reformation seemed to be at a stand ; when the mind appeared to have been struggling under a load too heavy for it ; when there was cause to fear that religious liberty had only been wrested from its oppressors to be laid by in neglect. But it was an unjust fear. The mighty agent of intellectual and moral power, when it had burst its prison-house, only stood for a time to survey the field of its labours, and collect its strength. It is no inactive principle. It is either weighed down by fetters stronger than can now be forged, or it is working with all but omnipotent energy at all the springs of society and thought Already some of the most grievous abuses have fallen in the dust before it ; and already errours, which have not yet ceased to maintain a confident bearing, are quaking at the speed of its noiseless march. We live at the happy age to witness its triumphs. Our eyes are privileged to see the progress of this great *salvation of the Lord.*

I am far from maintaining, that the work of religious reform is mainly effected. There are mighty instruments in operation to forward it ; but it is a great and difficult work, and will find occasion for all the force they can exert.— There is much indifference on the subject, which is only to be aroused by vivid, and various, and seasonable exhibitions of its importance. There remains a lamentable degree of ignorance concerning it, which is only to be informed by much time and patient industry. There are still many deeply seated prejudices, which it is a delicate and a slow task to root out. The chain, with which errours in religion have bound themselves to men's interests and passions needs to be broken link by link. To expose them is often to encounter displeasure and distrust, and here is a discour-

agement and a disadvantage. But the situation of him who, in this period of the world, *contends for the* pure *faith once delivered to the saints*, is still far different from theirs who have assumed the same office in other times. They indeed had reason to believe,—for the word of God was their assurance,—that the *counsel of the Lord* should at length and permanently *stand*. They had a warrant for the persuasion, that *every plant which their heavenly father had not planted*, deep as it might have struck its roots, and many as there might be unwilling to resign its shade, must at length *be rooted up;* and, little as the condition of the world seemed to favour the diffusion of Christian truth, to doubt that it would one day prevail would have been a distrust of providence; for he who made Christianity for man no doubt fitted it for his cordial reception in some period of his progress. But still their faith was confirmed by nothing within the compass of their sight; and often must the impatient inquiry have risen to their lips; *how long, oh Lord! how long?* The day, so anxiously looked for, of a thorough religious reformation, has dawned upon us. The mists of the morning still obscure its rising sun; but it is melting them fast as it climbs to its meridian, and scatters *healing from its wings*. We rejoice in its light. We bless the kind providence that sends its animating influences, and welcome to their happy destiny them who shall watch it, as it sheds the *perfect day*.

Meanwhile, to what purpose is it to *discern* these favourable *signs of the times*, unless it be to encourage us to follow the leadings of providence, and do our endeavour that the signs we rejoice in may be fulfilled? While we profess so much satisfaction that we have been led to adopt the faith of Christ in its primitive simplicity, let me ask the question, whether we are sufficiently in the habit of regarding it as a *trust;* whether we perceive distinctly enough that an obligation lies upon us to pray, give, and labour for its diffusion? I am confident in affirming, that no man, who has received it, can consistently observe its progress with uncon-

cern ; that on no ground, except that of natural incapacity, can any man dispense himself from the duty, *even as he hath received the gift, of ministering the same as a good steward of the manifold grace of God.* No ! he who, in this age of limited religious knowledge, has been brought to the reception of *the truth as it is in Jesus,* has received a broad commission for the service of mankind ; he has been appointed to a weighty charge ; he is aided by great advantages ; and he will be called to a strict reckoning. The Protestant reformers,—when the work was to be begun, and a voice or a hand was lifted for its aid at the risk of all that feeble nature shrinks from,—might better have been pardoned, if they had all *begun with one consent to make excuse ;* but if we, when the work is to be carried on at the hazard of only a little inconvenience or obloquy ; if we, taking it up at that advanced point that three centuries more of equal progress with the last three would place it beyond the power of opposition ; if we should suffer it to be overborne, what name of contempt will a wronged posterity find, expressive enough to immortalize our infamy ?

I shall be told, perhaps, that it can scarcely be of great consequence to labour for the reformation of errours in religion, because the Christian character is found exhibited in equal excellence among the professors of different systems of religious doctrine. I would be the last to call in question the substantial justness of this statement, whatever qualification a close analysis might show it to require. I trust I not only acknowledge, but deeply and humbly feel it to be to a great extent true ; and I would be rebuked and excited by the eminent graces of some whose belief I call in important respects corrupt,—dishonourable to God, opposed to scripture, and adverse to religious progress. So far from their religious character being uncharitably implicated in the judgment which is passed on their opinions, they themselves will be the readiest to allow, that, if they have erred through want of caution, diligence and prayer, they are convicted of an unfaithfulness, for which they have need of par-

don; and, on the other hand, the admission will as readily be made, that, if their errour has been involuntary and unavoidable, the virtues which they formed, under the disadvantages arising from it, are only more complete evidence of their hearts being *right with God.* They have become good Christians in despite of their errours, by force of those leading religious truths, which, standing aloof from their false theories, and aided by their good feelings and good sense, alone exerted a really efficient power over their lives. But, while we emulate their attainments, may we not think that a character, whose root was so firm as to withstand such a shock, might have swelled into still nobler dimensions under the culture of a more spiritual and generous faith? Must we not wish that they had been saved from a kind of temptation, of which we have only to say that they have not been shaken by it as might have been feared? Can we reasonably expect that errour will be always without effect; that it needs not to be discarded, because it will always be disarmed; that in all other hearts it will be counteracted and inoperative as it has been in theirs, and all other men will love, as cordially as they have done, a God whom they account a *respecter of persons,* and a race whom they believe to be thoroughly and malignantly wicked? Can we justify it to ourselves to have no concern for that large description of men, who,—believing religion from the unjust representations they have heard of it to be a narrow, inexplicable, repulsive thing,—never acquaint themselves intimately with the spirit of its sanctifying rules, the peace and joy of its elevating consolations, nor know it in any other character than as a punctilious and at the same time obscure law-giver, whose requisitions they flatter themselves must at last be dispensed with, for the very reason that it is so difficult to meet, or even to ascertain them? Is it not worth some pains at our hands to present religion to such men in her substantial winning shape, that she may take hold of the hand with which they are groping in darkness, and guide their now undirected steps? Have we no concern

for the wasted glory of those finer minds, which, able to put forth the choicest hue and fragrance under the pure glow of heaven, have languished and withered beneath the touch of a blighting skepticism? Have we no compassion for them, because they have been so much in fault; do we not care to reclaim the infidel, by showing him that the trifling or incredible dogmas, which his hasty reason rejected, do not belong to our religion, and that it is a religion, which he who prizes his understanding, and would give it its most ample culture, cannot reject, and cannot overrate? Have we no pity for the Mohammedan, the heathen, and the Jew; and do we not care to present the saving faith of Jesus to them with her *beautiful garments* put on, instead of her motley disguise of Oriental and Gothick metaphysicks, that they may no longer turn away with such an unhesitating incredulity?— Let us do no such injustice to the omnipotence of truth as to think it a sluggish element. It is thoroughly instinct with life. There is no estimating the vigour of its vitality, or the bounty of its fruitfulness. And it is not our business to estimate them. But it is our business to place it where it may spread and fructify. The religious sentiment which we do not hold for truth is worthless or mischievous; and we must reject it. That which we do hold for truth is inestimable; and we must impart it. If the reformers had reckoned the dissemination of just religious views no worthy object of great zeal, we might now have been buying indulgencies, or doing whatever other impious act an infatuated ecclesiastical authority might have imposed; for they too might have argued,—while the church of Rome can form such characters as those of Ximenes and More, why take the risk and trouble of reforming it? If it be not a fit object of human effort, why does the divine providence seem now to be moving it so rapidly onward on the swelling current of human improvement? No! religion was meant to do no less an office than to lay a powerful hand on all the affections and faculties of men. False religion, in its least hurtful form, is that same hand smitten with palsy, which though

it should be as willing, can never be so strong.—Divine wisdom is our pledge, that the unadulterated system of evangelical truth is able to form a Christian character of greater grace and elevation,—is able to develope and mature a more godlike virtue,—than is within the reach of the most respectable among its counterfeits. Acknowledging, as all men do, the imperfection of the Christian character, as it has been hitherto exhibited in the best of Christians, we have a right to assume that the proper instrument for removing that imperfection is the unobstructed power of purely Christian truth. But, even if it were not so,—even if we should allow truth to be no more fit than errour *for the use of edifying* the really religious mind,—we should still have motive enough for striving to diffuse it, in the hope of engaging the indifferent, convincing the skeptick, and evangelizing the heathen. The statement that sincere men, who believe errour, are as advanced Christians as sincere men who believe truth, would be unsatisfactory in this connexion, however just it might be proved to be. The undeniable and the really important consideration is, that, according as religious truth or errour prevails in the world, the amount of religious feeling and conduct in the world is greatly augmented or abridged.

Will we justify ourselves then for taking no part in this momentous work by such arguments as, that *the truth is great and will prevail*;—that God knows how to accomplish his own great purposes, and, when the time is come, will bring them to pass without any help of ours? God is able to accomplish his own purposes; but, when they have related to human welfare, it is not often that he has accomplished them except by human agency. Truth is great, and will prevail. But it will prevail because it is great enough to enlist strenuous minds in its cause. It was great in the Apostles' times; but it did not prevail, till, by impressive evidence of the power of its confessors to do and to bear, it had overpowered the bigotted opposition of an unbelieving world. It was very great at the period of the Protestant

reformation, and it prevailed, because it was great enough to nerve its champions to do desperate duty on the fields of Switzerland and Germany, and its martyrs to glut the flames and dungeons of England, Italy, and Spain. We are not to expect miracles to do what God has designated for the appropriate work of well-principled human energy. We are not to discharge ourselves from the duty of promoting a good object, by saying that it cannot but be contemplated in the counsels of God. God designs that his truth shall be diffused; and he designs that men impressed with its worth, and faithful to its obligations, shall diffuse it. The event is to take place, because men will not always be content to express a confidence in its power, for the purpose of releasing themselves from its service. We have only to decide whether it shall be advanced by our instrumentality, or left for other hands; and our assumption, true as it may abstractly be, will be false in its application, as long as it is used for our apology. We are self-contradicted, if we argue that truth is great enough to make its way, while our conduct shows that it is not great enough to command from us those services, by means of which it must ultimately triumph.

Do we say, then, that we will not be fellow-workers with providence in this great work of religious reformation, because it will subject us to the imputation of a party spirit? God forbid that such a spirit should ever actuate us! It wages deadly war with that temper of universal charity, which is the distinguishing temper of the Gospel and its author. It gives the mole's eye, and the adder's ear, and makes the heart like the nether mill-stone. God keep us from bringing scandal on such a holy cause, by enlisting for it such a corrupt auxiliary, and dispose us,—so far from labouring for it with any selfish view,—to wish from our hearts, that, if we have mistaken its character, a signal defeat may follow all our endeavours for its advancement! But, on the other hand, let us remember, that the promoters of the largest designs of the most pure and elevated chari-

ty are liable to the stigma of a party zeal ; and we are by no means at liberty to abandon a post of duty because of the danger that a bad name may be applied to the earnestness, with which we labour in it. It would be an easy task indeed to frustrate good undertakings, whose accomplishment requires joint effort, if to call their advocates partisans were sufficient to discourage them ; and would it not be a shameful confession, that a good cause suffered for want of our support, because we feared our motive would be mistaken ? If we are capable of being moved by such an apprehension, we may be sure that it is not such advocates as we, that any cause asks, or can be advanced by. But are we anxious lest we should become tinctured, and not lest we should be charged with a narrow spirit of party? This is a reasonable anxiety, and we ought to cherish it. It is an anxiety, however, which, vigilant as it ought to make us, does not entitle us to find our safety in unprofitableness. We have no right to shrink from entering on a sphere of duty, which God has opened, because he has also placed temptations there. What would the condition of the world be now, if they, who have rendered it important services, had excused themselves, because of the danger, that, by the fault of others, they might be placed in situations where their dignity might be exposed, or beset with opposition calculated to ruffle their tempers? If we are truly fit for God's service and the world's, we shall distinctly contemplate these dangers, and cautiously guard against them ; but we shall not practice such a self-deception as to think of evading them by relinquishing our set task. When the best happiness,—the most weighty interests of others are in some sort given us in charge, we have no more a right to abandon them, for fear of being tempted to promote them in a narrow spirit, than we should have a right to say, that we will not give in charity lest we should contract a habit of profuseness, and that we will not ask in prayer, lest we should be tempted to a negligence of our secular concerns. One way alone is safe for us ;—to enter boldly on the field

of our appointed duty, and trust humbly to our own watchfulness and the grace of God, whom we are serving, to secure us in its attending trials.

This is the spirit by which we should be actuated;—a glowing zeal to promote the influence of our religion, and a jealous self-distrust, lest our ardour should betray us into any deviations from its path. A party spirit never served religion, and it never will. We must give it no aliment; we must allow it no indulgence. If suspected, it discredits our labonrs; if real, it vitiates and makes them vain.—Without a fervent, and, if need be, a self denying spirit of religious reform, on the other hand, religious truth is not to advance; and, unless we will say, that the cause which God most favours deserves not our concern, we shall not discard the one because of the odium which justly weighs upon the other. They are so easily distinguished, that it would seem as if only blindness or perversity were in danger of confounding them.—When we aim at the defeat of an opponent rather than at his conviction,—to work him shame and not to do him good; when our dissent from his opinions estranges or impairs our good will; above all, should we be tempted to aim at an advantage over him by any artifice,—it is no better than an earthborn party spirit which impels us, though it be presumptuous enough to call itself a *zeal for God*.—But, if we have such a sincere generous love of truth as to labour and rejoice in its dissemination, not for our credit who offer it, but for the sake of its own precious uses; if our benevolence, and not our pride, is wounded by its rejection and gratified by its prevalence, this is an ardour which cannot glow too warmly. It is the appropriate spirit of reformers. It is the spirit of apostles; of the Son of God himself.

When this spirit exists as it ought, the question will not need to be asked, in what way it shall be manifested. It will throw itself into wide and various action, and the world will bear its trophies. Is the inquiry made, however, what we, of this age, may particularly do towards the dif-

fusion of a powerfully enlightening and sanctifying faith? I answer: Some of us may carefully expound, and formally maintain it. The least demand it makes of us is that of a frank avowal of our sense of its reality and importance. It cautions us against representing the distinction between itself and errour as immaterial, as against a habit of evil omen. We are not indeed required to sequester the church from its proper uses to make it a theatre of controversy. Far from it. But, in whatever department or connexion we undertake to exhibit truth, we must represent it distinctly as it has disclosed itself to us, and not in those generalities which make it ambiguous and unaffecting; still less, with an appearance of reserve, of self-diffidence, and cold preference for it, which can have no directer tendency, than to prevent any strong reliance on our more explicit statements. Besides, the *steward of the mysteries of God* is not limited in his duty or opportunities to the office of dispensing them from the desk; and those truths of religion, which, from the intricacy or extent of their proofs, do not admit of being there advantageously discussed, he may disseminate by the circulation of written arguments, the fruit of his own or of others' scriptural studies.—Ministers and parents have access to the forming minds of those who are forthwith to speak the publick voice, and the fair tablet should be carefully stamped by them with the deep and graceful impress of truth.—Christians should be faithful to it in the walks of their common life, and the sentiments of their familiar conversation.—There is no so worthy object for the devotion of the more efficient class of minds. What is a poem written to a soul edified, or an office won to a principle established?—The eminent and popular friends of uncorrupt religion should in all unostentatious ways make known their attachment to it, that as far as possible they may transfer to it the respect in which themselves are held; and they, who have been won to it where it is in disrepute, should on their part,—'unshaken, unseduc'd, unterrified'—shew by a manly though a meek profession, that

they are *not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ*, as it has manifested itself to them. They should regard themselves as appointed to maintain its honour and assert its claims each in his separate sphere ; and, so far from permitting themselves to be dispirited or overborne, should rejoice in being *counted worthy*,—if that should be,—*to suffer shame for such a name*. What have they to fear, believing, as they must, that the defenders of the declining corruptions, which they assail, are but writing the epitaphs of their fame ? What more would they have to stimulate them, when they consider that the grateful memory, in which the world holds its inventors and discoverers in art and science, is languid compared with what must be cherished hereafter by saints in earth and heaven for every individual, who has done a worthy service in restoring to the faith of Christ its primitive integrity and power ?—Religious truth is to be advanced towards its due ascendancy by the labours of a learned and devoted ministry ; and our institutions for forming and supporting such a ministry should not be left to languish. Establishments for preparatory education to it under circumstances favourable to independent and intelligent inquiry, and to the due development of that character, mental and religious, which it demands, are a prominent object of attention. The interests of religion are unspeakably concerned in ample endowments of every kind, and a competent and attentive supervision being provided for them.— Missionaries should be sent out by a systematick and liberal charity ; not into well ordered christian communities, able to provide christian privileges for themselves. A breach of christian charity may not be thus risked for the introduction of a more correct religious theory, and where the *power of godliness* prevails, the *doctrine according to godliness* may be safely left to work its own way. But they should be sent into the moral wastes of our own country to *make them rejoice and blossom*. They should be sent to those rising but feeble churches, whose corrected views require an enlightened ministry *to build them up in the most holy*

faith, and help them *grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.* They should be sent to undeceive those misbelieving nations who have as yet no worthier idea of our religion than that it is a system which they could not understand nor receive, if they were ever so well disposed,—and so bring back, if it please God, from distant continents and islands, a new and brilliant evidence of its power.—This is a reading age, and there is no more direct access of light to men's minds than through 'the spectacles of books.' It becomes us to take care that this avenue be every where provided for its entrance. Societies for the gratuitous distribution of the scriptures, should be bountifully patronized. They have already been read to vast profit, and they are to be read to greater profit still. Books assisting in the explanation of them,—popular commentaries and treatises,—books of devotion, sermons, religious narratives, and polemical writings from the most elaborate to the most familiar,—should be put in liberal circulation by the charitable care of the opulent. There is a great taste and demand for all such works, and *cast* as they may seem *on the* untracked *waters*, there is a rich return from them *after many days.*—Finally and chiefly, every individual should be perpetually and earnestly intent on recommending what he receives for religious truth by his own bright example of its efficacy. This is an unobtrusive argument, but ultimately it never fails to be to a great extent a triumphant one. Never were contemned heresies more unsparingly vilified than were those of the Methodists and Friends; but they have *lived* their way into publick veneration. No good man,—however he may dissent from their theories,—silently hears them reviled or ridiculed.* They have not only overcome prejudice, but have actually gained prejudice over to their side by the humble fervour of their piety, and the splendid labours of their beneficence. The Catholicks are in many places regaining their once

*This was written and preached before the author had seen an article upon the Friends in a late number of the Christian Spectator.

forfeited standing by a similar honourable course. Here is experimental proof, that we are able, by the persuasive testimony of holy lives, to relieve our views of christianity from that weight of unreasonable dislike, by which we have lamented to see them oppressed. When we observe the power of exemplary goodness to disarm uncharitableness against what we account errour, we must needs allow to it an invincible power to disarm uncharitableness against what we account truth; and we should feel that we owe it to the interests of christianity as well as to our personal religious interests *to serve God* in all things *with a perfect heart and with a willing mind; to walk in wisdom towards them who are without, in meekness instructing them that oppose themselves,* and steadily to practice that *pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and keep ourselves unspotted from the world.* The work may be long in prosecution to try the faith, or display the resources, or purify the zeal, or punish the remissness, or mature the graces of its friends; but, labouring thus for its advancement, we may well be content to await its consummation with a patient confidence.

In the natural course of events, the house which we have this day met to devote to sacred uses may probably be standing when we, and our children, and our children's children, and those to whom they shall give birth, are all assembled in the silent congregation. If no casualty befals it,—when the forms that as yet have no name shall approach to arrest and anticipate the work of decay, and relieve this ground of its then ancient burden, how many events will have become old history, whose rudiments yet lie hidden from us behind the veil of coming time! We may not go behind that veil to look for a solution of the signs of the present day, nor presumptuously affirm, that we have now read their augury aright. But great events will no doubt before then

have been registered, whose causes are even now seen in motion; and, when one considers the vigorous action and apparent direction of these causes, is it absurd to suppose that, before that day, this may be a pillar in a universal Protestant church bound together more closely, at least, than now, in the fellowship of *one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, even the Father of all?* Is it wild to imagine that many an already tottering column of an erring faith will fall sooner than these strong walls?—Meanwhile, it is safe to anticipate, that thousands of immortal beings will here have been dedicated at the beginning of their earthly pilgrimage and remembered at its close. They will be brought hither in the fond arms of their parents, the fond hope of their grateful hearts. Again they will come with the thoughtful brow of manhood, and again on the faultering step of age; and then they will come no longer, but mourners for them will fill their places. Their children, and their children's children, like them, will be born, and die, and *return to their dust*, and the posterity of those who first come to worship in these courts, will have given place to strangers, whom they, nor their fathers, knew not. In this house, where no sabbath has ever yet witnessed cold devotions offered, or God's message unfaithfully proclaimed, the *glad tidings of great joy* will have warmed many a pious heart, or fallen dead on many a heedless ear, and *a host which none* now *can number* of immortal spirits will be looking back on it from the world of retribution, with blessings on its improved, or bitter self-condemnation for its lost opportunities. With anxious, but with cordial greetings, we bid it God speed on its passage down to future generations. *For our brethren and companions' sakes, we would* affectionately *say; peace be within it.* May the Father of mercies and God of all grace always guide and govern the momentous concerns which are to be transacted within its walls, and make it to many heirs of salvation the abiding place of his presence, the *gate of heaven!*